

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 60: Why I Like Lynx ***

A text-only Web browser! Is this some sort of joke? No -- this article is devoted to Lynx, a Web browser that forgoes graphics, but leads the pack in terms of size and speed.

No doubt your computer has one (or possibly both) of the big two Web browsers: Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer. Both of those browsers are packed with features -- all the latest bells and whistles. Some Internet users would argue that those browsers are too bloated, slow, and buggy. In short, the big boys' browsers are victims of "creeping featurism." Some Web surfers don't want such big programs, or use a computer that simply doesn't meet their tremendous system requirements.

Whether you are limited by your system or just want to try a something slimmer, there are alternatives to the corpulent corporate browsers. In issue 26, I wrote about Opera, a slim browser for Windows (available from <http://www.operasoftware.com>). For the Macintosh, a trim graphical browser called iCab is on the horizon (<http://www.icab.de>). But for sheer speed and size, you just can't beat Lynx.

Lynx doesn't do graphics, which accounts for its small memory and disk space needs. Not having to load graphics from Web servers also makes browsing the Web with Lynx very fast, even over a slow modem. Of course, you can disable graphics on any browser, which will speed them up considerably. But Lynx is faster anyway: it loads quickly and displays pages quickly. It doesn't have the overhead of code to show graphics or Java applets. It doesn't play that plinky-plunky MIDI music, have a built-in HTML editor, or support plug-ins.

It does do what's important, though: its features include bookmarks, frames, forms, cookies, proxies, and security for handling credit card transactions. In fact, according to its creators, "there is almost no content on the Web that Lynx cannot retrieve and display, either by itself or by calling on other software designed for the purpose." In addition, Lynx is used extensively by the sight-impaired because it is compatible with text-to-speech applications and braille output devices.

Will you miss graphics on the Web and the luxuries a feature-packed browser? Maybe. But you'll never get those other browsers to work (or at least, work well) on an old 386 PC, a Mac SE, or even a fast Pentium III hobbled with a 2400 BPS modem. And if you're stuck in some backwater of the Net with just a Unix or VAX shell account and no access to a graphical interface, Lynx may be the only way you'll see the Web at all.

How small is the program? For the 32-bit Windows version, the whole installation (including documentation and other sundry files) weighs in at less than 1.5 megabytes. The MacOS version is about 1.1 MB.

Like so many things on the Net, Lynx started its life in the academic arena. The program was originally created at the University of Kansas, but is now maintained by the Internet community. The program has grown to work on a wide variety of platforms. There are versions for just about every operating system you can name,

including Windows 95/98/NT, DOS, and PowerPC and 68000-based Macs. There are also versions for OS/2, Rhapsody, NeXTStep, Solaris, AIX, SCO, VMS and Linux. The program works pretty much the same on every platform, although some versions contain enhancements specific to that platform. (For instance, in the Mac version you can drag-and-drop HTML files on the Lynx icon, and the PC versions support color.) Also, Lynx has been ported to various personal digital assistants, in part because it is ideal for use on machines with small displays. You don't even need a mouse, because on every system, you use the keyboard to navigate Lynx.

Oddly, there's not a Windows 3.1 version, although you can use the DOS version on your old Windows machine. The DOS and Windows versions require a 386 or better processor. But if you just can't scrape a 386 system together, then fire up the 286, or even your ancient 8086 machine -- there's a reduced version of Lynx called Bobcat, which will work on the oldest of the old PCs. (The name is someone's idea of a joke: a Bobcat is a small Lynx. The name was picked to imply that it is a less mature sibling to the Lynx browser.) Bobcat is available from <http://www.fdisk.com/doslynx/bobcat.htm>.

No matter what version of Lynx you need, you'll have some choices to make before you download it. First, you can download the source code for Lynx or the ready-to-run program. Most of us non-geeks will opt for the ready-to-use "binaries" rather than compiling source code ourselves. Also, for many platforms, you can choose to download the latest, beta version or a tried-and-true "official release" version. The beta version may have more features than the release version but may also be buggy. Sometimes you don't have a choice -- as I write this, the Mac version is only available as a beta.

I'm not saying that Lynx is the perfect browser for everyone, but it can be a great tool in the right circumstances: if you have a computer or PDA that doesn't have the memory, storage or speed to run a fat browser. If you're stuck with a shell account for Net access, or if you can't use a mouse or are blind. It's also a perfectly good browser for those of us who don't fall into any of those categories, but are just ornery enough to want to forgo the whole multimedia thing every once in a while.

==*== RELEVANT WEB SITES ==*==

Download Lynx for any platform: <http://www.crl.com/~subir/lynx/binaries.html>

DOSLynx: http://www.cc.ukans.edu/about_doslynx/doslynx.html

Bobcat: <http://www.fdisk.com/doslynx/bobcat.htm>

MacLynx: <http://www.lirmm.fr/~gutkneco/maclynx/>

Lynx FAQ: http://www.access.digex.net/~asgilman/lynx/FAQ/Als_picks.html

Many Lynx-related links: <http://www.crl.com/~subir/lynx.html>

Opera: <http://www.operasoftware.com>

iCab: <http://www.icab.de>

==**== THE END ==**==

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Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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